

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 23, 2021

1:02 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Grier Hopkins, Chair
Representative Ivy Spohnholz
Representative Harriet Drummond
Representative Sara Hannan
Representative Tom McKay
Representative Kevin McCabe
Representative Mike Cronk

MEMBERS ABSENT

All members present

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

OVERVIEW: ROADS & HIGHWAYS

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

JOHN MACKINNON

Commissioner

Department of Transportation & Public Facilities

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint and answered questions.

DOM PANNONE

Director, Administrative Services Division

Department of Transportation & Public Facilities

Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint and answered questions.

RYAN ANDERSON

Northern Region Director

Department of Transportation and Public Facilities
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint and answered questions.

WOLFGANG JUNGE

Central Region Director

Department of Transportation & Public Facilities
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint and answered questions.

LANCE MEARIG

Southcoast Region Director

Department of Transportation & Public Facilities
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented a PowerPoint and answered questions.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:02:26 PM](#)

CHAIR GRIER HOPKINS called the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:02 p.m. Representatives Spohnholz, Drummond, Hannan, McKay, McCabe, and Cronk were present at the call to order.

CHAIR HOPKINS asked committee members to go around the table and introduce themselves one by one, and all members did so.

OVERVIEW: ROADS & HIGHWAYS

[1:10:17 PM](#)

JOHN MACKINNON, Commissioner, Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (DOT&PF), shared a PowerPoint presentation, which was included in members' packets. He began with the responsibilities and structure of the DOT&PF, which included Alaska Aviation and the Alaska International Airport System on the aviation side, and Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) on the marine side. There was also a facilities service division, he added, which this year has absorbed the Department of Administration's leasing component.

COMMISSIONER MACKINNON stated the DOT&PF also managed measurement standards and commercial motor vehicle compliance. An important

part of the DOT&PF was also program development, he stated. Finally, the DOT&PF managed the state equipment fleet, he said. The DOT&PF was divided into three regions, he explained: Northern Region, Central Region, and Southcoast Region. Commissioner MacKinnon directed attention to the outline of Alaska superimposed onto a map of the contiguous United States, exemplifying the former was almost as large as the latter in terms of size served, emphasizing the takeaway was when all infrastructures were taken into consideration, including the 235 rural airports, 140 of which are off the road system and thus the "only way in or out," the DOT&PF served "every Alaskan every day."

COMMISSIONER MACKINNON presented a detailed list of the components which made up DOT&PF's infrastructure on slide 2. These included 837 public buildings maintained as well as the longest highway tunnel in the country, the 2.5-mile Anton Anderson Tunnel.

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DOM PANNONE, Director, Administrative Services Division, DOT&PF, referenced slide 3, on the 2021 Fiscal Year (FY) operating budget, which was \$606 million. He explained each segment of the pie chart, of which the green-colored segment, or "other," was the biggest at around \$187 million and was comprised of interagency receipts for DOT&PF services, international airport revenue funds, and the highway equipment working capital fund. The purple segment, at \$167 million, included Capital Improvement Project receipts, and paid for engineers, planners, and the personnel who delivered projects. The blue and red segments, at \$149 and \$101 million respectively, were the state operating budget. These segments were also designated unrestricted general funds (UGF) and restricted general funds (RGF), respectively.

MR. PANNONE moved on to the second pie chart on the slide 3, which showed \$875 million in federal funds paid for infrastructure and improvement projects. The state funds, \$65,000 UGF and \$16,000 RGF, were the ones needed in order to receive federal dollars, he explained. The line graph showed the budget for the two biggest programs, AMHS and Highways and Aviation, he stated. The significant drop shown for 2020 vis a vis AMHS was a \$40 million reduction in UGF; the RGF showed a 15% decrease in budgeted funding over the past five years. The message was that reductions in funding directly affected what services could be offered to the public. Mr. Pannone offered a

detailed explanation of slide 4, which outlined what comprised funding. The graphs showed how much funding was spent on highways by region: Northern Region, Central Region, and Southcoast Region. The AMHS was included in this revenue, Mr. Pannone offered, as the AMHS was part of the National Highway System. A portion of funds received was from riders, he added.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked about CARES Act funding for transportation, and if the difference between "new" and "always" federal money were reflected in cost breakdown.

MR. PANNONE replied federal money existed in the capital budget as was typical; federal funds were received to improve infrastructure, but beyond those improvements themselves, in almost all cases maintenance was largely the state's responsibility. In terms of CARES, federal funds which were usable in the operating budget were received. He would be happy to provide a breakdown, he added.

REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked if the slides reflected additional federal operational money or only the federal capital money ordinarily received.

MR. PANNONE replied, referencing slide 1, FY 21 operating budget would have \$35 million from federal authority on the operating side from CARES funding, but some of it was being reprogrammed for next fiscal year.

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REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ asked if she had heard correctly that 50% of AMHS budget came from rider fares.

MR. PANNONE replied traditionally the budget was 50% UGF and it did come from fares.

REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ mused if only land highways did as well as marine highways.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked if 50% of fares covered the AMHS where the other 50% came from.

MR. PANNONE replied in Governor Mike Dunleavy's current operating budget for the AMHS, \$51 million was budgeted from general fund receipts and \$45 million was budgeted from AMHS funds which were derived from receipts, so roughly half of the AMHS budget was revenue and half general funds.

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE clarified half of operating cost for AMHS was subsidized by the state and half came from collected fares.

MR. PANNONE replied yes.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked how much of the motor fuel tax went toward the operational cost of Alaska's highways, and what percentage that would be.

MR. PANNONE referenced slide 4, which showed approximately \$35 million was collected on gasoline sales, and went toward maintenance and operations. He referenced the table on slide 4 which broke down motor fuel receipts.

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COMMISSIONER MACKINNON mentioned DOT&PF owned and maintained almost 5,400 roads. There was an annual capital construction program, funded 93% by federal funds, of about \$500 million per year. In March of 2020 when folks started feeling the effects of COVID-19, the DOT&PF realized things could be in jeopardy, but by making a COVID-19 mitigation plan alongside contractors and among the construction industry, which was communicated to the Alaska Municipal League, annual construction program went off with "hardly a hiccup." Since so many families' incomes were involved, especially, Commissioner MacKinnon shared that he was very proud of the DOT&PF's efforts to "keep things open most of the time." He mentioned the closure of the Silver Tip maintenance station, located at the junction of the Seward and Hope Highways, which had been a challenge, having recently experienced weather conditions the likes of which had not been seen since 1983. He also brought up Klondike Highway, closed by avalanche on numerous occasions, to illustrate that even when working under full capacity, stations were closed due to weather.

COMMISSIONER MACKINNON said motor fuel tax receipts came in lower than was expected, which he compared to getting part of the budget in Canadian Dollars [meaning value was lost in

conversion]. Limited resources were due to equipment and personnel both, he said. He added at least 12 experienced personnel retired recently, he said, and the positions they vacated would not be filled easily.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked about hybrid vehicles and their impact in terms of unrealized motor fuel taxes.

COMMISSIONER MACKINNON replied he could find an answer but there had been a steady decline in motor fuel tax receipts over the last four or five years. He mentioned a way to "capture" would be to raise registration fees for electric vehicles. He added federal gas tax has not been increased since 1993, but the cost of highway construction had more than doubled during that time.

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REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ asked what the impact was on 2020's motor fuel tax revenue with the increase in telework and thus reduction of commuting due to COVID-19.

COMMISSIONER MACKINNON replied since July 2020 numbers were about 80-85% of what had been expected.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked if there was a corresponding downturn in maintenance needed as well.

COMMISSIONER MACKINNON replied he did not see any downturn in maintenance as snow still needed to be cleared off, and potholes were caused by freeze/thaw action and old pavement, not by traffic, and 80-85% of normal traffic on roads would not make that much of a difference.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked for clarification if the downturn in motor fuel tax had captured was 80-85% of usual.

COMMISSIONER MACKINNON replied the DOT&PF saw a 15% decline, and that he would send a graph.

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RYAN ANDERSON, Northern Region Director, DOT&PF, continued presenting with slide 6. He imparted that geographically speaking, Northern Region was the largest, with 90 airports, 390 bridges, 8 maintenance districts, and 322 personnel working out of 37 maintenance camps. Northern Region also served 124 communities, 6 boroughs, over 50 city governments, over 100 tribes, and one metropolitan planning organization (MPO), the Fairbanks Area Surface Transportation Planning Organization (indicated as FAST Planning on the slide), composed of mayors of Fairbanks and North Pole, representatives of the Fairbanks City Council and North Star Borough Assembly, as well as DOT&PF representatives. The Northern Region design and construction team, comprised of 200 full-time and 70 seasonal employees, historically delivered \$200 - \$250 million dollars in construction contracts for airports and highway infrastructure projects throughout the Northern Region.

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CHAIR HOPKINS asked the \$250 million came out to about half of the \$500 million the state put forward.

MR. ANDERSON replied the number included airports as well, so the number represented airport and highway funds, so it usually came out to 30% or more.

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MR. ANDERSON referenced slide 7, Northern Region Overall Budget evolution since 2013. The DOT&PF used a variety of funding sources both state and federal. approx. Annual expenditure from all funding sources in the Northern Region was approximately \$80 million. He pointed out UGF have declined since 2013, deferred maintenance funds have declined, federal airport improvement funds have maintained. The DOT&PF was, according to Mr. Anderson, reliant on federal preventative maintenance funding for eligible activities. These activities included asphalt repairs, leveling, resurfacing, drainage controls, striping, and the like. He pointed out federal funds were unable to be used for snow removal or routine maintenance such as grading or vegetation clearing. Heavy maintenance on the Dalton Highway was indicated in green on the line graph, he added.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked about the percentage of the Federal Airport Improvement program.

MR. ANDERSON replied the information could be provided, and it was a small amount.

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MR. ANDERSON referenced slide 8, innovations and accomplishments. Teams had developed road "priority systems" after snow events. For 2019-2020, there were 391 snow events. After snow, the target response for priority one highways and expressways, 12 hours, was met in just over ten hours. Priority zones two, three, and four, with 18, 24, and 30 hours respectively, didn't do as well. When taking into consideration what should be done with the information, it was determined that a limited number of staff, with the help of technology, should do more. Looking at conditions on a particular road before heading there was one example.

MR. ANDERSON shared scheduling crews on 12-hour shifts during the winter to deal with snow removal helped with target response times. At the start of the pandemic, crews who had formerly been one week on, one week off on the Dalton Highway went to two weeks on, two weeks off, which also helped production in terms of less travel time. This change did have an additional budget component, he added.

MR. ANDERSON referenced slide 9, entitled Northern Region Capital Program. He led members through the chart on that slide entitled "2021 Northern Region Construction." He pointed out that due to COVID-19 and CARES Act funding, DOT&PF was able to have a "zero match" for airport funding, but he added that he did not anticipate this staying the case indefinitely.

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REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ asked about the zero match.

MR. ANDERSON replied for the federally funded airport improvement program, which funded airport projects, there was a 0% match.

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MR. ANDERSON looked at slides focusing on an overview of construction projects beginning with summer 2021 projects: projects already begun last summer as well as projects to start

this coming summer. There were 46 projects in all, in Barrow, Kotzebue, Nome, and Cordova, as well as in smaller communities.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked what a segmented circle was.

MR. ANDERSON replied a segmented circle was a navigation device comprised of a set of panels around a windsock, which served the purpose of displaying traffic patterns to airline pilots.

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked if segmented circles were federally mandated.

MR. ANDERSON replied advisory circles were mandated by the Federal Aviation Association as the currently recommended device, and they were in the process of being updated throughout the state.

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CHAIR HOPKINS asked about concerns regarding maintenance on the Dalton Highway.

MR. ANDERSON a rainy summer such as 2019-2020 wasn't the best for road surfacing, as wet material degraded quickly. He said DOT&PF was trying to get more grading done and was also trying new techniques for pothole patching. With federal infrastructure dollars, DOT&PF was always looking to repair sections of the Dalton Highway, he stated. He added that south of Deadhorse was to be paved, which would drastically improve the road for truckers. After pointing out one more project on the map, he said the DOT&PF tried to stay on top of Dalton Highway maintenance every year. The two weeks on, two weeks off schedule should improve things even more expediently, he added.

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REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked if paving miles 362-414 of the Dalton Highway was a first.

MR. ANDERSON replied there were several paved sections on the highway, but that that was the northernmost section to be paved.

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REPRESENTATIVE CRONK offered that east of Toque to the border was the worst road in the state, and yet it was considered a "lifeline." He wondered when it could be updated.

MR. ANDERSON replied there was a lot of summer work and there were several large capital projects in the queue. He offered to deliver a list of the projects.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked where the infamous "Dalton slump" was in relation to where they were paving.

MR. ANDERSON replied about mile 208-209, south of where they were paving.

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MR. ANDERSON turned attention back to slide 11, Fairbanks area projects, including the University Avenue Bridge project and Third Street intersection project. Other project highlights included quite a few on Richardson Highway. Chena Hot Springs Road project was entering its second year, with permafrost a continuing challenge to keeping roads level and straight. Air convection embankments were being utilized to try to keep things more frozen. Thermal modeling work with the University of Alaska Fairbanks continued to inform innovations, Mr. Anderson imparted.

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REPRESENTATIVE CRONK asked if Chena Hot Springs Road was becoming more qualified for federal funding, and what the difference was between highway funding and road funding.

MR. ANDERSON replied there were National Highway System routes, which received a larger proportion of the funding, and Alaska State Highway Funding, and Chena Hot Springs Road was part of the latter category.

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MR. ANDERSON shared that the University Avenue Bridge over the Chena River, built in 1963, would be replaced entirely; the Wendell Avenue Bridge, built in 1953 before Fairbanks had paved roads, would be replaced in 2021. Back to the Dalton Highway paving project about which Representative Drummond had asked,

maintenance and operations departments would be working together to closely monitor the insulated embankment with the goal of saving grading work.

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CHAIR HOPKINS asked what an insulated embankment was.

MR. ANDERSON replied an insulated embankment worked like home insulation. It was two to six inches thick, went two to six feet down, and was laid to keep heat from penetrating down from the roads, thus keeping embankments frozen, he said.

CHAIR HOPKINS asked if an insulated embankment was constructed differently than that of Gold Stream Road.

MR. ANDERSON replied Dalton Highway embankment was almost ten feet high, and it was colder so it would stay frozen longer.

MR. ANDERSON spoke to the last slide, moving the Dalton Highway Drill Rig 28 miles south, an 18-hour move. This was the second year in a row the move will have taken place, he added.

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WOLFGANG JUNGE, Central Region Director, DOT&PF, shared a breakdown of Central Region, which was a combination of Alaska's most urban areas: Anchorage, Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) and the Kenai Peninsula, combined with over 80 rural communities. Central Region was the most populated, with over 290,000 people living in the Anchorage area, over 100,000 in Mat-Su, over 55,000 down on the Kenai, and at least 15,000 in rural areas. In addition to the road system, Central Region also supported a robust aviation network which in turn supported some of the busiest airports including Ted Stevens International Airport in Anchorage, hub airports in Bethel, Dillingham, and Homer, and 69 smaller airports in rural communities. Central Region also owned and operated Anton Anderson Memorial Tunnel, also known as the Whittier Tunnel, which stretched 2.5 miles and connected Whittier with the National Highway System.

MR. JUNGE moved onto Central Region's operating budget. Like Northern Region, he pointed out, maintenance and operations were largely funded with state general funds. The significant drop between FY 16 and FY 17 reflected a boundary change done between those two years, he stated. Funding categories consisted of aviation fuel tax, rural airport receipts, motor fuel tax, motor

rental tax, and program receipts from maintenance programs. In terms of Central Region's Capital Budget, Mr. Junge pointed out that while 2020 was a busy year with \$196 million in construction payments, 2021 looked to be quite a bit busier with \$460 million in active contracts either in process or ready to be bid on, representing at least 40 projects in highways, aviation, earthquake permanent repairs and airport infrastructure and repairs. The DOT&PF estimated the projects represented close to \$8 million in preventative maintenance contracting on highways and airport infrastructure. Mr. Junge pointed out that as with the other regions, Central Region required match funds from the state to receive federal funds.

MR. JUNGE pointed out that with the CARES Act money, like Northern Region, the federal aviation match went to zero in 2021. In 2021 Central Region expected to receive \$340 million in its statewide transportation improvement program and \$120 million for airports under the airport improvement program.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked whether the looming designation of the Mat-Su borough as "metropolitan" transportation meant funding would be divided differently.

MR. JUNGE replied funding for municipal planning organizations (MPOs) was set and allocated by population demographics. The population expected to come out of the census for the 2020 MPO within the Mat-Su borough, primarily encompassing Wasilla and Palmer, would be apportioned out of the MPO funding provided by the federal government, he added.

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE said he hoped it would have resulted in more increased funding.

MR. JUNGE replied there was not a larger allocation; the funding was just further subdivided among the existing MPOs.

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MR. JUNGE moved on to slide 21, Maintenance Innovations and Accomplishments, which highlighted some safety measures, including an increase in brine, which improved safety as it helped prevent bonding between snow/ice and pavement. He also mentioned the addition of week-on, week-off schedules at the Bethel airport, which has helped with filling positions to keep the airport open. Despite record-setting rain levels, highway

closures were avoided due to 20-hour coverage on Seward Highway. In addition, LED lighting system upgrades have lowered costs and increased service life. As far as accomplishments, there were several drainage and surface repairs noted.

MR. JUNGE moved on to slide 22, Regional Construction - Anchorage. He noted that regardless of location, the goal is always to improve and rehabilitate. The DOT&PF Central Region was anticipating a robust year, he stated, with projects ranging from highway construction and improvement projects to rehabilitation projects, pavement preservation and earthquake repair projects. One notable project was the O'Malley Road construction.

MR. JUNGE moved on to slide 23, Regional Construction - Kenai. The notable project here was the Sterling Highway reconstruction project, a \$500 million-plus project anticipating completion in 2025.

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REPRESENTATIVE DRUMMOND asked if Sterling Highway estimate was really \$500 million, half a billion.

MR. JUNGE confirmed this.

MR. JUNGE moved on to slide 24, Regional Construction in Mat-Su, the fastest-growing area in the state, in which there were more than 15 active projects in 2021. The largest of these was Parks Highway, he stated. Work was underway for a dedicated Mat-Su district office by 2022. Additionally, DOT&PF had funded Mat-Su borough over \$100K to help set up an MPO with Wasilla and Palmer. A board was to be established by June 2021, he stated.

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REPRESENTATIVE CRONK asked what the holdup was with the last section on the Long Lake area near Toque.

MR. JUNGE replied one of the challenges with the area north of Palmer was that it was a low average daily traffic count. He said there was currently a "Long Lake re-route" project in play, but that was still four to five years out.

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MR. JUNGE imparted to the committee some details about the Seward Highway project, one of the largest projects, which would include replacement of five bridges originally constructed after the 1964 earthquake. He also shared information about Sterling Highway construction, another large project for the state, and Knik Goose Bay Road reconstruction from two-lane to four-lane. Knik Goose Bay Road reconstruction was the state's number one priority project, he added.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE why permissions were only being granted at this time, when Knik Goose Bay Road expansion was meant to start in 2021.

MR. JUNGE replied under Governor Bill Walker, Knik Goose Bay Road construction had been paused, which contributed to a year or two of delay. In addition, he added, the city of Wasilla had desires in terms of roundabouts, there were over 150 partial acquisitions, and impacts on adjacent property owners and businesses could be quite substantial. The DOT&PF had incorporated the Acquisition Incentive Program, which incentivizes adjacent homes of up to 20% over market value for property owners.

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LANCE MEARIG, Southcoast Region Director, Department of Transportation & Public Facilities, shared the Southcoast Region had fewer communities connected to each other by roads, it relied more on airports, the Alaska Marine Highway System, and other marine transportation. As shown on slide 28, Southcoast Region included just over 1500 road lane miles, 20 maintenance stations, 44 airports, 17 seaplane bases, 186 bridges, and 15 harbors, serving 96 communities, 12 boroughs, 51 city governments, and 60 tribes.

MR. MEARIG shared, as other regions had done before him, the Southcoast Region breakdown of highway and aviation maintenance and operations funding breakdown. This breakdown was represented on a bar graph on slide 29 of the presentation. A summary of 2021 Southcoast Region construction was presented on slide 30, with projected contract values between \$140 and \$175 million, which historically speaking, was almost twice the yearly average.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked whether maintenance operation facilities in horrific shape in Haines could be helped with this money, or if it was separate.

MR. MEARIG replied regarding airports, the funds could be used, but in terms of highways the federal funds were separate and could not be used for buildings.

REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked whether there were any requests or plans for those maintenance operation buildings, specifically in Haines, to be updated.

MR. MEARIG replied needs have been identified and prioritized, but funding to address deferred maintenance had not been received.

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REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ asked why the state airport match was lower in Southcoast Region.

MR. MEARIG replied it was a feature of the types of airports in Southcoast.

REPRESENTATIVE SPOHNHOLZ said she was interested in the type that made it distinct.

MR. MEARIG said he'd have to get that information.

[2:44:26 PM](#)

MR. MEARIG directed the committee's attention to slide 31, which showed Southcoast Region's winter storm response time. As with the other regions, Southcoast was broken into four priority "zones," each of which had its own response time. As exemplified on the slide, targets in priority zones one and two were met with success while lower priority zones three and four struggled a bit.

MR. MEARIG shared slide 32, airport and highway and harbor projects in Southcoast Region. He stated Alaska used to have an extensive harbor program but had been trying to divest in harbors and turn the money over to a community or another project. In terms of projects to highlight, there would be a major reconstruction of Haines Highway, miles 12 to 25, broken into two phases.

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REPRESENTATIVE HANNAN asked about acquisition of private property land and whether it had been resolved.

MR. MEARIG replied it had not been resolved and project was expected to be underway in 2023.

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MR. MEARIG presented slide 34, Katlian Bay Road, a \$33 million road extension through extremely challenging terrain. This project would move into its third season when weather permitted.

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REPRESENTATIVE CRONK asked what the purpose was in extending Katlian Bay Road.

MR. MEARIG replied Katlian Bay Road was being extended for recreational and subsistence use for residents of Sitka.

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MR. MEARIG said the last project, roundabouts at Stephen Richards and Floyd Dryden Middle School in Juneau, were completed under time and budget due to the lack of tourist traffic during the "sad" year of 2020.

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REPRESENTATIVE MCKAY asked for a roundabout application, and whether adjustments had been made for inflation.

COMMISSIONER MCKINNON replied accidents were much less severe with roundabouts, and in terms of the budget figures he could not answer but directed it toward Mr. Pannone.

[2:57:04 PM](#)

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Transportation Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 2:56 p.m.